

# Praxis in Gandhian terms

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**W**hat lessons can Gandhi, his views and his life offer for social sciences? In a more historical and sociological sense, many are inclined to see an individual as being a mere cog in the wheel that is society and what an individual does is bound by the socio-economic and political context which impinges on one.

The Marxists often are regarded to be the worst proponents of such determinism emerging from materialist episteme that embody their interrogations. But then, even societal understanding, using a lens other than that of materialism like that of Emile Durkheim, does not accord primacy to an individual. Indeed, Durkheim sought the individual will to be sublimated to the collective will of the society where the inherent iniquitous power and social structures were not confronted the way Marx or Weber did. In seeming contrast was Gandhi. Consider some of these statements – “The individual is the supreme consideration”, “Ultimately it



is the individual who is the unit", "If the individual ceases to count what is left of society?" and "I have discovered that man is superior to the system he has propounded".

But then what kind of individual was Gandhi celebrating? The idea of individual and individuality of uninhibited greed, of vicarious sensory satisfaction, of aggrandizement of the ego or any sort of mindless Epicureanism was obviously not what Gandhi ever professed. Gandhi can be seen to make a distinction between individualism and individuality. Individuality is something that emerges in relation to a situation in which a person finds herself and uses a frame (but here, the frame central to Gandhian thought being, i.e., violence, morality, greed, etc.) to understand and

negotiate with a situation. In other words, individuality is about asserting agency through applying a conscious political choice where concerns of cooperation, harmony, justice and equality frame our thoughts and action. In contrast, individualism represents a culture of ego-nurturing enabled through ideas of competition, survival and satisfaction of baser instincts of greed and avarice. In such a brazenly consumerist world and the pathologies of violence, social mal-adjustment and anomie that modernity and industrialization has engendered, individual centered intervention as a possible remedy is not without its promises and possibilities.

In contrast to a period and time before national, industrial, and capitalist revolutions, modernity provides the freedom to think beyond the confines of religious dogma and social conventions. In such a view, Gandhi was a modernist even as modernity seduced the world with its crass materialism. But Gandhi, in a sense, turned modernity upon itself in his critiques and interrogations. Industrial modernity seen in consumerism, urbanization and its pathologies are its unedifying manifestation. But concurrently, bourgeois modernity also paves the way or provides freedom to think and act in ways where the very foundation of material and industrial modernity can be critiqued. As Jurgen Habermas, a German sociologist and philosopher, argued, modernity offers possibilities of 'immanent critique' which when lost sight of; we ignore its emancipatory dimension. In such a sense then, Gandhi's notion of the individual concurs with the Habermasian notion of modernity as one's ability to express herself subjectively but *pace* Habermas, not through reason and rationality alone.

While according to Habermas, freedom from all forms of external authority meant that the subject "has to create its normativity out of itself," Gandhi re-worked this freedom not so much out of modern rationality but through native intuition and transcendental realization. Freedom and its fullest realization was therefore not to be obtained by jettisoning both tradition and nature or seeing it as barriers to be surmounted but to re-connect with it in abstraction of its spirit, universalism, and holism. While Indian tradition has hierarchy, insularity, oppression and violence so manifest, Gandhi as a free agent, stripped it off its incriminating and exploitative aspects. He sought to redefine and 're-present' tradition including religion through a morality of moderation and temperance. This, Gandhi felt, helps to deal with the alienating and existential crises that modernity with its misleading promises of material and creature comfort brings forth. Gandhi realized industrial modernity is totalizing and violent.

Such a possibility inherent in tradition and religion, Gandhi demonstrated through his own life – of austerity, simplicity and invocation of the divine through prayer in consonance with and in continuation of people's own socialization in pre-modern social set up. This according to Gandhi had equal if not more liberatory, pedagogic potential than those overt, rationale discourses of liberation, equality and justice that also obtained in modernity.

While noting Gandhi's ideas on education, we see the same unity between tradition and nature evidenced in India's rural culture being emphasized. Schooling as was emerging in colonial India and continues to be the case even today, alienates a child from its



cultural and social moorings. The curriculum emerges not from felt experience of the students and their social world but imposes an alien knowledge system, one that sustains a society and political economy which drives wedges between people in the name of educational competence. It is a system of knowledge which benefits and supports only the possessed few, paves the way for an unsustainable world riddled with divides of community, creed, and religion.

Gandhi, by emphasizing vocationalization of school curriculum, was not offering it as a palliative for the dispossessed children of village peasants alone but for all children, rich or poor, across demographic divides who will learn by kinesthetic stimulation. Farming, crafts and weaving in itself can teach children a lot about science, math, heritage, and history. These, in emerging from the child's own social and cultural milieu, would have greater bearing and relevance for the children and help them in better understanding. While Gandhi was no pedagogue or educational thinker, keeping with the overall spirit and context in which he located his understanding of society and its problems in general, it still provides a framework for evolving a more formal and normative curricular structure.

As Jane Sahi points out, "Gandhi's sustained effort to create a framework for learning, where each person is included, is highly relevant to our present situation, where so many children are being rejected, or failed, because the system is geared to provide the fewest number with greatest material good. Further, the competitive, narrow mono-system of learning is oppressive and far from facilitating agency and

autonomy, fosters indifference and powerlessness or an aggressive assertiveness".

Now Gandhi did not seek to assert his truth as one that was self-revealing in itself and that which people had to compulsorily swallow. Truth would reveal itself only when we engage in society with its seams and warts but such an understanding is personal. This 'revelation' is to be individually arrived at by the freedom that both state and society offers. But when this very freedom is absent or denied, then it has to be fought for, not limited to or limited by liberating political and ideological articulation but also mediated by moral force and non-violence, i.e., *satyagraha and ahimsa*.

In social sciences in general and history in particular we read about so many collective efforts to bring about change – social, political, economic, and cultural. Though it won't be fair to say that changes towards freedom and liberty have not borne fruit, but mass, collective action rarely convinces all members of its purpose and arrives at similar meanings. Motivation and compliance by rhetoric, fiat, dictats do not sustain movements and neither do they sustain change. It is in such a sense then that an individual and an individual's understanding become important. Gandhi spent years in understanding how colonial rule was destituting and impoverishing millions in India by extensive travelling, discussions, readings, and meetings. So Gandhi, while concentrating on the individual and also seeking amelioration of economic or political situation by appealing to an individual's good conscience whose actions could redeem a situation, was not naïve or oblivious of the larger structures in play. But he ultimately believed that humans owe their conduct

and actions to their judgment of right and wrong, their conscience and their individual will. Firmly believing in religious doctrines across all faiths, he insisted that no religion whatsoever sanctions violence, exploitation, and greed. He also firmly believed that *ahimsa* was not an attribute of just Hinduism but a universal attribute. Further, it was also his conviction that humans are by nature not defined by violence or selfishness and it is not social structures that compel humans to deviate from the path of mutual tolerance and co-existence. Here it is the failure of the human will and deviating from the spirit of religious 'fundamentals' that causes strife and hunger.

Gandhiana, if one may use the term, is then a mode of inquiry and learning, to understand society and polity. While the concept of *praxis* emerges from materialistic epistemologies of liberty and equality, I would hazard to say Gandhi's concept of *dharmaic* action emerges from a more moralistic and nativistic concerns of social harmony, ecological sustainability, human dignity, and peaceful co-existence. This is not to suggest that aspects like liberty, justice and equality are absent from Gandhian prism or cannot be encompassed within it but are to be contended and elaborated more out of an individual awakening and by restraining impulses of accumulation, domination and aggression.

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